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ABSTRACT

The role of the family in the education of a young child, particularly during the first three years of life, is the subject of this symposium address. Four topic areas are identified as the foundation of educational capacity: language development, curiosity, social development, and cognitive intelligence. Professional educators, working directly with children, especially children over 6 years of age, have much less influence than was previously thought. From this perspective, the family must receive increasing priority as the first educational delivery system. Three main obstacles, however, confront families attempting to do the best job of educating their young children: ignorance, stress, and the lack of assistance. For the first six years of the child's life, especially the first three, continuing, low pressure, strictly voluntary, training for parents should be made available. Training could be made available in hospitals during the lying-in period, through adult education courses, and through public television programs. (CS)

REASSESSING OUR EDUCATIONAL PRIORITIES*

By

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My purposes today are to inform you and attempt to influence you about a topic I think is of the highest priority in regard to national educational policy, our national resources, and last but far from least, the solidity of our young families. That topic is the role of the family in the education of a young child, particularly during the first three years of life. My specialty is the study of what it takes to help each child make the most of whatever potential he brings into the world through the experiences of the first six years of life. That is my special role professionally and on the CS Early Childhood Task Force. I believe that our current national educational policy is significantly flawed in this particular problem area; that we are wasting much of our most precious natural resource; that we are talking about the people of the next generation; and that we are allowing the quality of everyday life for many of our young families to be far more stressful and far less rewarding than it could be. A great number of our very best-put-together 25-year-old women have a miserable average day with two young children; very few people realize this, and the last ones to know are their husbands.

I have been conducting research on the early educational development of children for about 16 years now. When I say conducting research I do not mean every few weeks for an hour or two; I mean that is all I have been doing. Seventy-five per cent of my professional time has been on direct empirical research on this topic. I have come to some central conclusions that cry out for a new look at our national educational policy.

First of all, children start to learn long before our educational system begins to concern itself with them. Traditionally, in this country and . : every other Western

country where there has been any writing on the history of education, the society first puts money into the teaching job when the children get to be about six years of age. As far as I can find in writings, no society has ever put a lot of money into the first years of life. Yet, everybody knows that children are learning from the first day they come into the world. Although they do not usually learn to read, write, or cipher much before five or six years of age, they do start, or fail to start, to learn in more fundamental areas that seem to determine directly how well they will later learn to read, write, and cipher.

There are at least four fundamental learning topics that all children cope with before their third birthdays. These are not debatable points by the way.

First of all, language development. We have known for years that language growth starts and, in a large way, develops to a solid working capacity before the third birthday. Two- and three-month-old children do not process the meaning of words at all. At six, seven, and eight months, they begin to understand the meanings of a few selected words; not surprisingly, words such as their own name, Mommy, Daddy, kiss, and bottle. That initial vocabulary is reasonably well understood, I think. By the time they are three years of age, most children have the capacity to understand most of the language they will use in ordinary conversation for the rest of their lives. Language is at the heart of educational capacity. It has its own primary value, and in addition an instrumental value of direct relevance to all intellectual learnings; and subtly, but just as importantly, it underlies healthy social growth. Sociability in the first couple of years of life depends for its good development on some capacities in the language area, particularly when it comes to other children.

The second major educational foundation that is undergoing development in this first three-year period is curiosity. What could be more important to whether a child learns anything, not just about academic subjects, but about the world at large, about what makes people tick, about how to become a good listener, than simple curiosity. It is the birthright of every child, with a few exceptions; the badly damaged children for example, may have less of it. But even if a child

comes from a miserable home and is beaten regularly, it is very difficult to stamp out strong, basic, simple, pure curiosity in the first eight or nine months of life. It is, unfortunately, not that difficult to stamp it out in the next year or two or, if not stamp it out, suppress it dramatically or move it over into peculiar aberrant patterns. For example, the two-year-old who looks at a new toy and unlike other two-year-olds only sizes it up to see how he can use it to badger his mother. That is not sheer, unqualified curiosity. That can be very tough on a young mother, by the way.

Third major point -- social development. In the last five or six years we have begun to apply a little more serious attention to the value of social goals for our educational system, although we are still kind of limping along in this area. For years we have had soft-hearted early education people saying a child is more than a brain, but very few people have listened to them because most of them do not have doctorates and most of them are not rhetorical. I personally believe (and I think I have a lot of research evidence to support it) that the social skills that develop in the first preschool years are every bit as important, every bit as instrumental, to the intellectual success of a student, for example, as the directly intellectual skills. In addition. I think a lot of people in this country would be happier if the children we produced were not only bright but were people with whom they liked to live.

We are pretty clear now on the details of social development; we know that human infants will not survive without some sort of strong, protective attachment to an older, more mature, more capable human. And, God or somebody else built into the creature a collection of attributes, tools actually, that help in the cementing of a relationship to somebody. For instance, that early social smile of the three-month-old is not reserved for any particular person. It looks as if the child is using it on everyone who happens by. It is as if the species had a kind of first-stage guarantee of attractiveness. The three- and four-month-old child is an incredibly attractive, nice-to-live-with creature. He starts to giggle and becomes ticklish for the first time, and he is given to euphoria a great deal. Now, that is fun, and the photographers like it a great deal; but, I think there is a more serious species survival virtue to this particular kind of phenomenon.

Then, between eight months and twenty-four months or so, one of the most gorgeous experiences you will ever see takes place; children establish a relationship, usually with the mother, because most of our children are still being brought up in homes by their own families. That is an incredibly complicated experience, making most contracts pale in simplicity in comparison to it. They learn thousands of things about what they can and cannot do in their home, what they can and cannot do in interactions with the primary caretaker, about how to read the primary caretaker's different mood states, and an incredible number of other things. After all, they have got relatively little in the way of important obligations other than just enjoying themselves, and one of the few really overpowering interests of the child eight to twenty-four months of age is that other key figure.

We have seen children at age two who are marvelous people to live with; they are free and easy; they are comfortable with their parents; and they have gone by the negativism of the second year pretty well. They can play alone well. They are just a delight. On the other hand, how many times have you heard a mother of a two-year-old say he does not play well alone? That is synonymous for, "He is hanging onto my skirt or my slacks or my leg hairs all day long." That situation can be very rough, especially if there is another child eight months of age, crawling around in the home. When we see a child for the first time at two years of age, it is too late. They are crystallized into their basic social patterns; and, we see those social patterns applied to all social encounters in the next year or two to other children who come into the home, to older siblings, and to other adults. A human personality is being formed during those first two years, and there is no job more important than doing that well.

Over and above that primal social development, we have the fourth fundamental learning area, the foundations of cognitive intelligence. There are all sorts of problems children cannot solve in the first two or three years of life, but they are learning the tools of the trade, and this process is beautifully and brilliantly explained, in detail, in the work of Jean Piaget, the Swiss student of the growth of intelligence. From the very first years, children are very much interested in cause-and-effect relationships, in learning about

simple mechanisms, such as flipping light switches on and off to see the consequences, and jack-in-the-boxes. Such events are trivial little things on the surface but they indicate a very deep interest in how things work and in the various characteristics of physical objects. After all, these children have not had a chance to examine many things first hand, and most things therefore are new to them.

These four topic areas are, I submit, the foundations of educational capacity. I will repeat them: language development, curiosity, social development, and the roots of intelligence. They are all undergoing basic formative development in the first three years of life, and the national educational system essentially ignores that fact. These fundamental learnings do not always go well. Indeed, there is reason to believe that failures in these learnings in the first years lead directly to underachievement in the elementary grades and beyond. We are getting there after the horse has left the barn. Secondly, poor results or failures in the first years are extremely difficult to correct, using any means we now have available. I will repeat that because it is a very strong statement, and I think I can support it: Poor results or failures in the first three years are extremely difficult to correct using any means now available, whether it is $10,000 a year spent in a private tutoring situation, a Head Start, a Follow Through or a Special Education program. Thirdly, relatively few of our children, regardless of the type of family that raises them -- that includes your families and mine, your grandchildren and mine -- get as much out of the education of the first years as they might. We are probably wasting substantial amounts of our most precious resource, the developed competencies of each new generation.

Can I back up these claims, or am I just another in a long list of educational sensationalists?

Point 1. Children who enter the first grade significantly behind their peers are not likely to ever catch up. There are exceptions, but the norm is that they fall further behind. This has been recognized educationally for a long time. Let me tell you a little story about the origination of the Brookline Early Education Project. The Superintendent of Schools in Brookline, Massachusetts, who is a very smart and

vigorous fellow, called me one day and said, "I have been reading things like Benjamin Bloom's statement that most of intelligence is already developed by the time the child is eight, and that half of it is in by four. I put that idea together with the experience we have in our school system [where, by the way, next year they have budgeted for each child at the high school level, $2,490, and $1,930 and change for the elementary levels]. I think I have a pretty good school system," he went on. "But, I know that when I get a child in the first grade who already looks weak I cannot do much for him, even though I have one of the best special education programs in the country."

As a reasonable man, he is driven to the consideration of the topic of prevention. He has no choice. In fact, it is the same reasoning that led to the creation of Head Start. But here is a person who has no excuses, he has first-rate people; he has more money than God, and he still cannot do the job. He said, "I want to recommend that all kids get into our schools at age four. What do you think of that as a good way to get into this problem?" I said, "That is a dumb idea." He said, "What do you mean? People have been telling me that public kindergarten is a great thing for all these years." I said, "Look, don't spend all your money on an expensive kindergarten program. Half or more of your kids are not going to get much out of it educationally, in my opinion. Take a look at what is going on in the first six years, not just in the fifth year. Try to get at the origin of educational deficits; try to prevent them, and try to help earlier in the game." And so we built the Brookline program.

Point 2. The country has been working on prevention in a very substantial way for nine years now. Head Start's original central purpose, I remind you, was to prevent educational failure. It has had lots of other purposes growing in emphasis in the last four or five years; that is, better early health care, better health, and better social and emotional development. But do not forget that the original rhetoric that sold it was to try to prevent educational failure. That has been its core purpose. It has had a budget (most of you know) of several hundred million dollars a year for these nine years, and it has been politically powerful. It has

concentrated on the three- to five-year age period. There are two conclusions I think can be easily drawn from the Head Start experience (so far) that are appropriate to this discussion: (1) It does not often succeed in its prime goal, no matter what somebody working in a center tells you. The best objective evaluation of Head Start is that by and large, by itself, it has not had much success in preventing educational failure in the elementary grades. (2) Perhaps even more important, serious deficits for many children are usually already visible at three years of age.

Point 3. To these facts, should be added a third, except for the fewer than 5% of our children born with serious defects or subjected to extreme abuse during the first year of life, serious educational deficits are not usually seen before a year-and-one-half of age. This point comes out of the educational and psychological research literature. Those same thousand children who are going to give you fits in the third grade look fine at age one.

Point 4. Educational failure begins to show itself toward the end of the second year of life. It is often very reliably detected at three years of age and nearly always detectable well before the first grade. Furthermore, educational underachievement by children who look average or slightly above average is quite likely, but it has not really been investigated in a serious way as yet. After all, the emergency situation, as always, comes first.

What causes low achievement levels in children? Can we as educators do anything about this problem or are genetics, for example, at the root of the problem? The question is a very complicated one, and I cannot deal with it elaborately here. But I will summarize my position on the issue for you. We have no conclusive evidence as yet as to how much achievement is due to heredity and how much is due to environment. We have fragments of evidence, but nothing like the weight of evidence you would need to resolve that issue on a scientific basis. My personal judgment is simply that both heredity and environment obviously play a role. Heredity certainly sets upper limits to development, but by itself it does not guarantee that those limits will be reached. If a child has serious

brain damage, no matter how you work on his early education, he is never going to achieve the levels that an intact, well-educated child will. But if a child comes into the world with great genes, he is not going to make the most of that potential irrespective of what happens to him subsequently. By controlling his experiences, I can prevent any child in the world from learning to talk, and I can prevent him from acquiring any of his skills; of course those are just the extreme cases. But my point is that so far we really have not thoroughly understood what it takes to help each child make the most of the potential he has. We have no right to assume that, by one way or another, children are doing that. In fact, we have plenty of evidence that suggests that they are not. I have done more direct research on the role of experience in early development than all but a handful of people in the country, and I am convinced of the power and relevance of early experiences in this area. Certainly until we have definitive evidence to the contrary, the most sensible policy is to assume that early experience makes important differences and to do everything we can to make such experiences as beneficial as possible.

For now, let me point out that there seem to be at least three major obstacles that families face in doing the best job of educating their young children. Let me digress for just a moment here. I very much enjoyed Jessie Sargent's remarks, at this symposium, particularly about the wasting of resources and the need for public education, which I underline. She did, however, refer to developmental day care and its costs in a way that I think may tend to mislead slightly. First of all, developmental day care, as far as I know, generally costs more than $2,000 per year. You will hear more about what it costs in later portions of this symposium. Three thousand dollars, I think is a better average price, and it could go higher. I agree with Mrs. Sargent that this country is not going to make that kind of money available in the near future for all the children who ought to have it or who need it. But more importantly, I think there has been a kind of assumption in the minds of some people that the way children get educated is through contact with a professional in a classroom or a center. I do not think that is the way it is going to happen, and I do not think that is the way it should happen. I think the way it is going to happen is

through the family as the first educational delivery system, rather than through a developmental day care center.

The three major obstacles that I see families coping with in trying to do the best they can for their children are:

First of all, ignorance; they do not know how to do the job. They do not know, for example, about the poison-control data that says that most of our reported poisonings in childhood take place between ten and thirty months of age. More importantly, they do not know the following reasons why such poisonings take place between ten and thirty months of age; (1) they do not know that babies in that age range are incredibly curious, (2) babies are inclined to use the mouth as an exploring organ, and (3) babies are unsophisticated about labels that have warnings on them, and so forth.

Parents do not know the story of social development. They do not know, for example, that to be a nine-month-old only child means to live in a world that is full of happiness, sweetness, pleasant interpersonal relations. On the other hand, to have an older sibling at home who is two, almost invariably means being on the receiving end of genuine hatred from time to time.

That sounds funny, but boy I'll tell you, it is a sad thing to watch a nine- or ten-month-old baby, when his mother is not looking, trying to put up with the real physical threats of a two- or two-and-one-half-year-old child who had previously thought the whole world was built for him. Now he has to share it with this creature who is into his toys, who seems to have first place in his mother's affections, and so forth. It is painful for everybody. The older child is having a very tough time. The younger one is having a tough time and may be experiencing things that I do not think anyone should have to experience, if they could avoid it. The mother may be having the worst time of all. Some women spend the whole day trying to control two such children, trying to avoid the destruction of the baby; and, the father comes home at night and wonders why the mother is tired. The simple fact is we do not prepare or assist people for this job. As long as you can mate, you are eligible to have

a child and the responsibilities that go along with it. That is absolutely crazy.

The second major obstacle for parents is stress. The eight- to twenty-four-month period is not only educationally critical (in my opinion) but it is also one of the most dangerous periods in life. I would guess that there is no period of life that is more dangerous in terms of maimings and accidental deaths. For example, an eight-month-old child who, for the previous three months or so, has had mature visual and auditory capacities, but has not been able to move his body anywhere, move him to an upright posture and he can see out into the room. It is a new world for him. No matter how poor it is, it is all new to him; and, somehow or other his species requires that he learn as much as he can during his early developmental years. Think of how much curiosity is building up inside that mind. Then, bang, all of a sudden he discovers he can get from here to there; and he goes. It is a very rare child who does not go. Children at this age are very much like puppies, kittens, even young horses I have been told, in their pure, unadorned curiosity. It is necessary for the species. They go, but they do not know anything at all about the world. They do not know that if you lean on something that is very spindly, it will fall; they do not know that those beautiful rose-colored shards of glass from a broken vase are dangerous. Everything looks interesting, and one of the prime ways in which they explore something firsthand is to immediately put it to their mouth. They are very impulsive at that age. They do not stop to smell, to savor, or to sip; they just bring an item quickly to the mouth.

We have to tell parents about these things. Why should they learn these things after they go to the pediatrician to have their child's stomach pumped? And, these are not controversial matters. There is a lot of controversy in this field about some topics such as: how you should rear children, whether you should teach them to read at nine months, and whether you should be stroking their limbs at four months for "tactile stimulation." There is a lot of literature and controversy in that area, but there isn't any about safety.

Every family should know how to safety-proof a home for the child's first crawling efforts. Every family should know

that a baby starts to climb at about eight or nine months of age. He can generally only climb six or seven inches at that point, but by the time he is a year old he will be able to climb units of twelve to fourteen inches; which means that he can climb almost anything in a room. That sequence has very powerful everyday consequences for a family. It should be common knowledge. Why is learning to drive a car so much more important than learning how to parent a child? Does the high school curriculum have room for driver education and no room for these topics?

Not only are the first years a dangerous period of life, but they mean extra work. The child crawling around the home makes a mess and if the husband likes a neat home, that adds to the stress. In addition, if there is an older sibling who is less than three years older than the child, it is quite normal to have significant resentment on the part of the older child, and that also adds to the stress on the mother. Furthermore, when the child gets to be sixteen or seventeen months of age he starts testing his power with his mother. That is quite routine; everybody goes through it, or virtually everybody. Some people find this very tough to take. So, there is a lot of stress involved in raising a young child, and raising two or three closely spaced ones creates almost an intolerable amount. Sometimes it is not tolerated, and women crack up and marriages crack up.

Third obstacle: lack of assistance. Mother usually faces this job alone.

The three obstacles I see through our research are: (1) Ignorance, they are not prepared for the job, they are not knowledgeable, indeed there is a great deal of misinformation around; (2) stress; and (3) lack of assistance. That is a pretty tough collection of obstacles to get through.

If there is a role for education, what is it? First of all, we have to accept the fact that professional educators, working directly with children, especially children over six years of age, have much less influence on development than was previously thought. This is, by the way, the major implication of the 1966 report by James Coleman on Equality of Educational Opportunity. Lots of threads of evidence are

contributing to the notion that professional education after the child is six very often just does not have the clout that so many parents in this country seem to believe it has, and that so many professional educators somehow assume that they have.

I remember a poignant story about a teacher in PS 201 in the heart of New York about six or seven years ago describing his classroom, a third grade classroom. He said that at no time could he count on more than 30% of the children to be in their seats, and at no time could he count on more than half of them to even be in the room. And he said, "Somehow or other, I am not doing well in that class." And I said, "How on earth can you expect to do well in that class?" I think teachers have been taking a terribly bad rap in this country. Educating a child is a partnership between the family and the professional educator. I think the senior partner is the family.

The second thing educators must do is recognize that the family is ordinarily the first educational delivery system for the child, and accept and face the consequences of that fact, seriously.

Third, we should prepare and assist the family for that fundamental educational job. How do we prepare and assist the family to give the child a solid educational foundation? Here are several suggestions:

1. Long before the child is born, we should teach each and every prospective parent all the known and accepted fundamentals about educational development in the first years of life.

How do we do this? I would suggest first through required courses in the high schools and secondly through public television. I would also suggest that neither of these vehicles costs a great deal. We might perhaps delete the geography of India for a year or for one semester.

2. Just before the baby is born, and soon after the baby is born, is a special time. A lot of parents are traumatized. They suddenly come face to face with the reality

that they have the responsibility for this fragile little thing and they do not know what they are going to do. That can be very tough. I have had lots of young parents express that fear spontaneously to me.

Suggestion: Teach each and every parent that you missed the first time around the same information, and routinely provide refresher information to the remainder.

How? Offer adult education courses, year in and year out, for pregnant women and their husbands. Perhaps provide video-cassette or filmed mini-courses in hospitals during the lying-in period. That is being done in Hawaii by the way. Most of these things are being done somewhere in the country. Provide high-quality public television material on a continuous basis. There is no reason why it cannot be done. I am involved in a commercial television program at present on which I talk about educating an infant. It works well. The viewing audience is dedicated; they watch that program like hawks. If I say something is wrong, they are right on it. You can do it and you can also make it fun.

In addition, just before or soon after the child is born, provide a low-cost education early detection and referral service to every family, with a promise that if a family participates, their children will not go through the preschool years with an undetected educational handicap. You can make that promise and you can deliver on it for about $200 per year for a child. We are running such a service on a pilot basis at the Brookline Early Education Project. I think it is a much smarter investment than public kindergarten for everyone.

3. For the first six years of a child's life, especially the first three, I suggest the following: make available continuing, low pressure, strictly voluntary training for parents.

How? Through resource centers and a home visiting program. I am talking, you will notice, about working through the family, not bypassing it and going directly to the child. Provide for monitoring educational development as an extension of that early detection and referral system, again through

medical, psychological and educational teamwork in resource centers, for about $200 a year.

Provide general assistance for parenting, again with a focus on education, in the following ways: Lend materials like toys and books out of your resource center. Have films and pamphlets available. Have professionals available to talk with parents once in a while. Have other parents available so that people can talk to each other about their frustrations and their joys.

Provide free babysitting for psychological relief for parents. I am not talking about day care; but, about a few hours a week when a mother can just leave her child, without guilt, and just get away. Can each of you men in the audience envision being in the position where you have total responsibility for the welfare of a one-year-old and a three-year-old twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week? It is hard to appreciate what that means until you have been put in that spot. One of the underlying frustrations of young mothers is that they cannot explain the experience very well to their husbands.

4. Provide referral service for special needs, an ombudsman function.

How do you do it? Through neighborhood resource centers. By the way, the home visiting part of all this, especially for families who want it and who have a little more difficulty with their children and fewer resources, again does not have to be a frightfully expensive affair. We find that if you go very often to a home (more than every two or three weeks) it gets uncomfortable. There is not enough to do for most families so if you go for an hour or two every six, seven, or eight weeks we guess that is plenty. That kind of program is nowhere near as expensive as running a conventional center; nothing like it.

5. Provide remedial assistance as soon as possible. If your early detection program finds a borderline hearing difficulty in a six-month-old-child, we can do something about that today. It is scandalous for this country to continue to let some fraction of our children go through primary language

acquisition with untreated, unnoticed hearing deficits. You can do the screening examination for $15 or so and the occasional higher level diagnosis will cost you $50 to $75, but what an investment.

I think it is fair to say that the entire task force of the ECS Early Childhood Project agrees with the general desirability of strengthening the family for its role as the child's first educational delivery system. Exactly how far to go in terms of dollars per year, of course, is not fully agreed upon. I suggested to you that for an expenditure of perhaps $300 or $400 per year we probably could do the bulk of what needs doing on this topic for most families; however, not to the very special need families, they are a much more expensive proposition. Exactly which ideas to use, again, are not fully agreed upon; but, I submit to you that there is a core of fundamental information about safety, social development, and motor development that most people do agree on, and that such information could be very, very useful to young families. Much needed assistance is feasible today. You could spend $1,000 a year for an average family, but I think you could do it quite nicely for $400 or $500. There just is not a better way to spend that money than to invest in improving the quality of our earliest educational systems.

Reference

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